



The Home-to-School Notebook

An Effective Communication Strategy for Students With Severe Disabilities

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Here are some communication dilemmas: How do you establish effective communication with the parents of a student who is unable to communicate on her own? How do you encourage parents to work with educators when they are overwhelmed with their responsibilities at home? What other options can we invent besides the time-worn parent newsletters, notes home to parents or caregivers, or phone messages? How do you deal with legal mandates for home-school partnerships? (see box, "What Does the Literature Say?").

This article explores one kind of effective home-school collaboration, the "communication journal" between educators and parents, devised particularly for those who work with students with severe disabilities. Let's go beyond "Had a great day" in our comments to parents.

Communication Journal

Written messages are the most frequently used forms of parent-teacher communication (Williams & Cartledge, 1997). Written communication is beneficial for two main reasons:

As much as possible, use the journals to communicate positive information about the student.

- It provides a permanent product that can aid in record keeping (Williams & Cartledge, 1997).
- Some people are able to express themselves more effectively in writing than other forms of communication (Williams & Cartledge, 1997).

A frequently used writing tool for home-to-school communication is a notebook that the child carries from home to school daily. The home-to-school notebook contains entries made by teachers and parents regarding the child's activities. Educators have referred to such notebooks as a communication notebook, daily log, traveling notebook, dialogue journal, notebook system, and daily report card (Kelley,

1990; Simpson, 1996; Williams & Cartledge, 1997).

In this article, we illustrate a system for improving parent-school communication using the home-to-school notebook. Here, we discuss the essential components of an effective journal, implementation procedures for both parents and teachers, strategies for enhancing communication between parents and the school, and methods for ongoing use of the journal. First, however, we must take an honest look at potential barriers to such a system of communication.

Barriers Related to Communication Notebooks

Although the home-to-school communication notebook appears simple to implement, some educators and researchers have noted problems that often impede meaningful communication. Bollig (1998) conducted an analysis of home-to-school notebooks. She found barriers related to content, written communication, and timing of communication:

- In terms of *content*, parents tend to report more opinion and personal

fact; teachers gave directives and evaluations. Further, teacher entries frequently lacked specific information, were not data driven, rarely addressed individualized education program (IEP) goals, and tended to reflect the opinion of one teacher rather than all school personnel involved with the student's educational program.

- *Written communication* often was ineffective, was not shared in a systematic manner, and was not a two-way exchange; parent input was minimal.
- *Timing* of the communication was problematic. Many teachers used a notebook system intermittently and had poor follow-through regarding questions (Bollig, 1998).

The absence of appropriate content, effective communication, and timeliness of responses hinder the usefulness of the home-to-school notebook. Such barriers ultimately impede consistency in implementation of a student's IEP.

Not all families will be comfortable using a home-to-school notebook. For example, some families may not speak English as their primary language. They may find using such a system difficult. Further, some families may not have the time or interest in maintaining ongoing communication. Before you put such a system into place, you should ascertain each family's interest in implementing a home-to-school communication system. Whatever the family's decision, you need to respect individual preferences for involvement. (In this article, we offer suggestions for families who wish to minimize time commitments to a communication system and offer alternatives to facilitate home-to-school communication.)

Given these issues related to communication between home and school for students with severe disabilities, educators are not using the notebook to its full potential.

Recommended Functions of the Home-to-School Notebook

We have identified three functions in the use of an effective home-to-school notebook. First, you can use the notebook as a tool to facilitate collaborative

What Does the Literature Say About Communicating With Parents of Students with Severe Disabilities?

Effective communication between parents and/or caregivers of students with severe disabilities and school personnel is critical. Educational success can be enhanced when parents are involved in the schools and act as advocates for their children and themselves (Elksnin & Elksnin, 1989; Sussell, Carr, & Hartman, 1996). Not only is ongoing communication a recommended practice, IDEA mandates parent participation in the development of educational programming for students with disabilities (Felber, 1997). Students with severe disabilities may lack skills in several areas, such as social interaction, mobility, cognition, and regulation of behavior. Further, many students with severe disabilities may not be able to communicate effectively for themselves. Consistent communication is necessary for such students so that all parties know what is occurring in and out of the school environment (Cattermole & Robinson, 1985).

Educators can strengthen parent-teacher communication for students with severe disabilities if they establish a functional, effective home-school communication (Williams & Cartledge, 1997). The communication between home and school is important for several reasons:

- Activities that occur in the school setting can be linked to the home (Simpson, 1996). The classroom environment should parallel a positive home environment to promote consistency and generalization of functional academic and social skills.
- Because the goals of a student with severe disabilities encompass more than traditional school-related skills, social and academic progress in a variety of domains and settings must be shared across environments.
- Multiple specialists/consultants (including medical staff) are often involved with students having severe disabilities.
- A student's program should be driven by the individualized education program (IEP; Bateman, 1998). The IEP document is the starting point for teaching and training. To effectively implement the document, continued communication between home and school is critical.

problem-solving. Figure 1 shows an example of entries in a home-to-school notebook that illustrates the attributes recommended for effective communication.

A second important function of the notebook is analysis of information. Teachers and parents may review data, look for patterns, and incorporate this information into instructional decision making (Kelley, 1990). For example, teachers and parents can ask questions such as, "Does the behavior occur across settings, time, and people?" and "Should modifications to the IEP be considered?"

Third, the notebook can function as an ongoing documentation of program implementation and student progress (Simpson, 1996). For example, teachers or parents may use the information to recommend additional assessment, pro-

vide anecdotal evidence, determine the need for related services, and/or assist with end-of-year reports.

Contents of an Effective Home-to-School Notebook

The home-to-school notebook can be much more functional when well organ-

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Written communication provides a permanent product for record keeping, and it encourages expression among people who may prefer that mode of communication.
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Figure 1. Sample Home-to-School Notebook Entries Over Time

Entry date: March 22, 2001

Entry date: March 23, 2001

Behavior/Goals	School	Home	Behavior/Goals	School	Home
Head-banging	Comments: Still working on decreasing this behavior. Today went well, he only seemed to head-bang during office work. Questions: Do you see him banging his head during like activities at home? Data: Total - 6	Comments: Jerry does some office-type work with his dad. We only see this occasionally. Could be because he really likes working with his dad. Questions: How about changing the person that Jerry works with during office work time? What do you think? Data: Total -1	Head banging	Comments: Good info. on working with Dad. Maybe we'll have Jerry work with male assistant this week. Today was the same. Questions: We won't change until I hear from you. Thanks for this idea. Data: Total 5	Comments: Questions: Data:
Appropriate greetings	Comments: S/L teacher reported that in community setting Jerry did a great job greeting wait-staff at McDonald's. Questions: none today Data: reported 2 socially appropriate greetings.	Comments: Great to hear this. Jerry likes McD's. Questions: Do you need \$ for CBI out-ings? Data: no opportunity	Appropriate greetings	Comments: Jerry has \$ for the week. Back to CBI setting tomorrow, none today. Questions: none Data: na	Comments: Questions: Data:
Leisure Health Club	Comments: Super, all OK, enjoyed time at club. Questions: none Data: 3 machines +	Comments: Good Question: Should we try new machines? Data: none	Leisure Health Club	Comments: I'll ask PT about new machines. I'll have her write you with recommendations. Questions: none Data: 3 machines +	Comments: Questions: Data:
Reading (functional words)	Comments: Rough day. No luck attending to task of reading functional sight words list. Questions: Are there any words from Jerry's neighborhood or home that should be included on our list? Data: Read 1 of 5 words correctly	Comment: Sorry to hear this. Some days are better than others, we want Jerry to read the Men's restroom sign at Bingo. We're going again Friday. Sign is strange—the word <u>Gents</u> . Questions: Do you think his inattentiveness has anything to do with seizures? I could check with his Dr. Data: Jerry picked out his favorite chips last night for a snack!	Reading (functional words)	Comments: Better day, attending improved. Thanks, we added <u>Gents</u> . He thought it was funny. Questions: Maybe you and I should review words again & eliminate those that aren't functional for Jerry. Data: 3 of 5 correct	Comments: Questions: Data:

Figure 1. (Continued)

Entry date: March 22, 2001

Entry date: March 23, 2001

Behavior/Goals	School	Home	Behavior/Goals	School	Home
PT	Comments: Not scheduled, CBI Questions: Data:	Comments: Questions: How often is PT cancelled? Data:	PT	Comments: Today we did more flexibility work. Jerry was very good. PT is rarely cancelled. We actually do a lot during Health Club. I got the message about machines. My preference is a press, for upper body strength. Questions: Do you have something in mind? Data: Good range of motion for legs and hands.	Comments: Questions: Data:

Special Attention:

Bus driver reported Jerry was screaming and tried to hit another student this morning. We put the behavior plan into place at school. Could you make sure that Jerry doesn't get TV after school, as we agreed for bus behavior? This will help with school and home consistency for Jerry.

Thanks for the information. No TV last night. Jerry wasn't happy about TV loss; we talked about why he lost the privilege.

Sometimes this plan is hard to do. His sister did get to watch TV, so I had to remove Jerry from the room. That was a struggle. Can we talk about this consequence?

Special Attention:

No news from the bus, which means Jerry had a good ride home yesterday and was good to school this morning. The plan must have had an effect. Taking away TV is hard. We could talk about different consequences. Would you like to call me after school today? I'll be in my classroom from 3:00 to 4:30.

Note: S/L = Speech and Language; CBI = Community-Based Instruction; PT = Physical Therapy

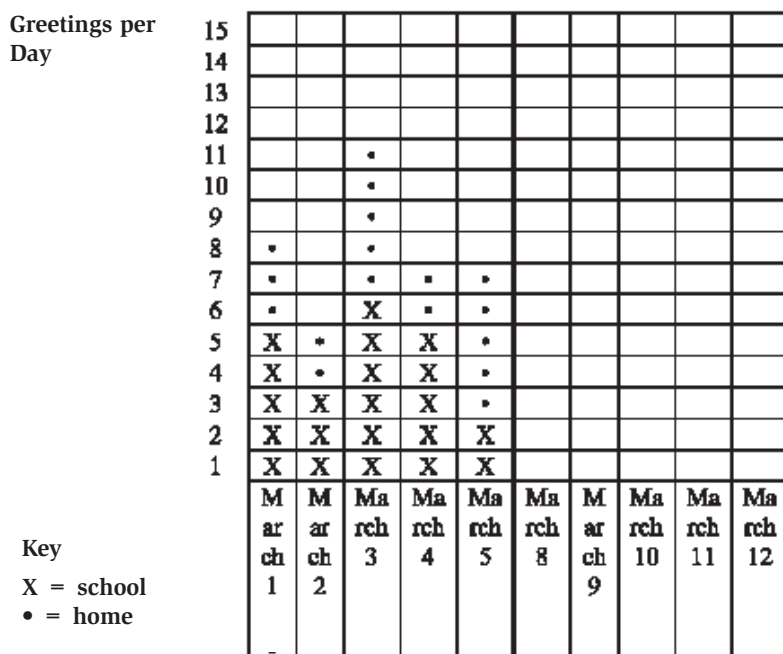
ized. To illustrate this we would like to introduce Jerry, a student for whom a home-to-school notebook was used. Jerry is a student with a severe disability who spends most of the day in a self-contained classroom. Figure 1 contains a notebook for Jerry that revolves around his daily activities. Components of the notebook should include sections that correspond to the student IEP. For example, sections of the communication notebook could be devoted to areas including leisure, functional academics, social skills, daily living skills, and behavior (see Figure 1). Additionally, this device should include writing space to address special areas of concern that require immediate attention.

To enhance generalization of student skills, educators and parents should monitor IEP objectives in both the home

By examining home-to-school notebooks, teachers and parents may review data, look for patterns, and incorporate this information into instructional decision making.

and school. If interested, parents could collect data related to student progress. You do not need to maintain data for all IEP objectives, however, at all times. You and the parents may identify certain objectives that are more urgent for data collection and comment. To simplify communication about data collection, we recommend that teachers summarize the data sent home. For instance, you could summarize data collected throughout the day on a bar graph to permit parents to see their child's progress at a glance. For example, Figure 2 depicts Jerry's graph on social greetings. Further, parents could continue to collect data in the home environment and indicate progress on the same

Figure 2. Sample Graph From a School-to-Home Notebook



bar graph (see Figure 2). Teachers would maintain complete data collection records in an appropriate and secure place in the classroom.

Teacher-and-Parent Notebook Implementation

Generally, you can use the home-to-school notebook in three different ways: to relay general types of information, for specific instruction that can be used in the classroom or home, and for active collaboration on a teaching venture that parents and educators are jointly undertaking (Taylor, 2000). To implement an effective communication system, you should establish procedures to ensure that everyone actually uses the notebook.

When setting up a journal, involve families in determining the following:

- How frequently to write.
- Who will write.
- What kinds of information you will exchange.
- Whether the journal will be open to all family members or restricted to certain parties.
- What medium for exchange people will use (e.g., e-mail, journal, note-

book; Simpson, 1996; see boxes, "Procedural Recommendations").

These procedures can include establishment of a routine for placement, writing time, and analysis of the notebook information.

Again, not all parents will choose to use such a communication system. Some parents may prefer simply signing

Procedural Recommendations for Parents

- Establish routine to review journal with student.
- Keep journal available.
- Include information from specialists (e.g., medical personnel, occupational and physical therapists).
- Obtain input from family members to include in journal entry (e.g., siblings).
- Establish a consistent, quiet time to write in journal.
- Review journal entries, analyze data, look for patterns of behavior.
- Review journal: Are your questions being addressed?

Procedural Recommendations for School

- Entry to classroom, collect journals.
- Morning routine to discuss with student what parent wrote.
- Keep journals in one place during day.
- Respect confidentiality.
- Structure journal writing during daytime routine, versus at the end of a busy day.
- Get input from specialists/teachers and others working with student (personal care aide).
- If student is included in a general education setting for a substantial part of day, the journal should travel to that setting and that teacher should make an entry.
- Analyze the journal, look for patterns of behavior.
- Establish a routine to return journal home.
- Avoid educational jargon.

their name following an entry to indicate that they have read the message (Williams & Cartledge, 1997). An alternative to daily exchange of the notebook could be to establish a rotating schedule (e.g., every other day the notebook is taken home). In Jerry's case, a daily exchange occurred the first semester of the school year. When a new sibling arrived at home, the notebook schedule was altered to an every-other-day exchange. Individual and family preferences for level of participation in the home-to-school notebook should be honored.

Communication Strategies

Common barriers to effective communication between parents and professionals include the use of unfamiliar language, technical jargon, or declarative statements. You must consider the parent's educational level before sending written communication; the language of the message must be adjusted accordingly (Shea & Bauer, 1985). Recognize and value parent perceptions and con-

cerns even if different from your own (Simpson, 1996). Pay close attention to who, what, when, and how you communicate information, as follows:

- When addressing *who*, include *all* parties involved with the student in both school and home environments. This includes parents, caregivers, siblings, and all educational personnel (such as occupational therapists, physical therapists, and speech/language pathologists). For example, Jerry's notebook was regularly shared with the physical and occupational therapists who work with him.
- Issues of *what* to include in the notebook encompass addressing student objectives, use of data, and care when answering questions from home or school.
- The *when* of communication involves establishing and maintaining a daily routine for use of the notebook and providing immediate responses to questions from any party.
- *How* should you communicate information? Be explicit, systematic, and comprehensive and employ questioning versus use of only declarative statements. In Jerry's entries (Figure 1), note the questions exchanged between school and home. The notebook does not contain all reporting

using the home-to-school notebook. By using this system, parents and educators can enhance student programming, develop and maintain IEP objectives, implement data collection across settings, and encourage collaboration among the variety of professionals working with students who have severe disabilities.

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When setting up a journal, involve families in determining who will write in the notebook, how often it will circulate, and what people will write about.

statements; parents are asked for advice, and the parents question Jerry's schedule. As much as possible, use the journals to communicate positive information about the student (Simpson, 1996).

Final Thoughts

We have presented a system for improving parent-to-school communication

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